



CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST

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"The Pleasure of the Company..."

For the past week or so Barry and Linda Constable, who live at Muckleford, not far from the Golf Links Have taken much pleasure from the company of a very attractive visitor to their little dam, a very old one, which is situated just behind their house. At first they thought it may have been a Brown Bittern, but several heads and several reference books combined to form the opinion that it is an immature Nankeen, or Rufous, Night-heron. It doesn't seem to be very disturbed by all the interest it is creating, so we were able to get within about 20 feet of it.



A place members might like to visit -

"A native plant aboretum in Vahland Rd. (off Emu Creek Rd.), 18km from central Bendigo by way of the Strathfieldsaye Rd. The garden is open weekends and public holidays from 9 am to dusk. Guided walks available.

R.H.S Journal of victoria

FEATHERED MINSTRELS OF THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH

By Harold J. Pollock.

The nightingale has probably inspired more poets and writers with its song than any other bird. Mainly through their influence it has come to be regarded by many people as one of the finest of all bird singers. Today the very name conjures up thoughts of sunny, spring days and melodious bird song.

The Nightingale's song is certainly pleasant enough, but does this rather drab-looking little bird really deserve its reputation as one of the finest of all bird songsters?

In various parts of the world, including Australia, there are probably many songbirds with voices equally as musical, or even more so, than that of the Nightingale. However, it seems that Australians do not always recognise the beauty of their birds song. An early settler, apparently bitterly disappointed that the Australian landscape was so different from the gentle undulating, green hills of the Home Country wrote: "The leaves are blue, the flowers have no fragrance and the birds no song."

One colonist even suggested the Nightingale be introduced to Australia to teach the native birds how to sing. Perhaps these early Australians were too busy with the toil of living to listen to the songs of the birds, or they may have heard the birds' song but were too biased to admit its beauty.

If an international competition for bird songsters were organised and each country represented by six of its finest songbirds, I dare say that the Australian team would probably win a gold medal. That said, just who are our star Australian song birds - the professionals, so to speak.

Anyone at all familiar with our birds will undoubtedly place the Pied Butcherbird as this country's number one songbird. Almost twice the size of the Common Starling, the Pied Butcherbird is a bold fellow with a wicked looking hooked bill, which it sometimes uses to wedge small birds, insects and reptiles between branches or on to thorns. The common name of butcherbird is derived from this habit.

Also known as the Organ-bird, the Pied Butcherbird has an extraordinary variety of flute-like calls that are often rendered from the topmost branches of tall dead trees. Butcherbirds sometimes sing a duet, each voice complementing the other, while they spread their wings and bow to one another in a charming fashion.

Early one morning in Murwillumbah, northern New South Wales, I sat on a eucalypt stump and listened, enthralled, to the dawn song of a Pied Butcherbird. The lovely melody filled the still air as the flute like voice went smoothly up and down the scale. One musical cadence was completed with a few delightful bubbling notes. The singing session lasted perhaps ten minutes and ended with a clear pronunciation of the word "Waipukarau", the Mauri name of a small town in the north island of New

Zealand. In all my years in the Australian bush I have never heard a Pied Butcherbird sing as long or as melodiously as this one did that sunny, spring morning in Murwillumbah. I have since come to the conclusion that he was a maestro of his kind. But John Hutchinson, an expert on Australian birdsong, avers that one of the most common calls of the Pied Butcherbird reminds him of the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

The butcherbirds of Australia [there are four in the group] are a distinguished band of bird minstrels. The Black Butcherbird of northern Australia and Papua New Guinea, a much larger bird than its pied relation, has a rich yodelling song of great variety and beauty. This shining black bird with a metallic sheen is rather shy and so is much more often heard than seen. Another in the group, the Grey Butcherbird, has a wide variety of rollicking, musical calls, which are perhaps not so loud or clear as those of the pied variety. This lively bird, found in all Australian cities, is a popular visitor to parks and public gardens and becomes quite tame if fed.

The fourth kind, the Black-backed Butcherbird, is only found on Cape York Peninsula and has a whistling song very similar to that of the grey variety, although maybe quieter and less musical.

Next on the ladder of famous Australian songbirds would be the Grey Shrike-thrush - a handsome grey bird with large dark eyes, found almost throughout Australia. Its beautiful, liquid and varied song is often heard in private gardens and public parks. The superb Lyrebird, the cleverest mocking bird in the world, obviously appreciates the melodious notes of "Whistling Dick" for he seldom fails to include this song in his extensive repertoire of imitations. Sometimes he embellishes the Grey Shrike-thruses song in a charming manner, as though to show the original owner how it really should be sung.

Another Australian bird with a sweet whistling call is the tiny White-throated Gerygone. This tiny sprite, barely a finger's length from beak to tail, has a pleasing melody comprising a descending trill ending with an upwards slur. For one so tiny its voice carries a surprising distance. It is said that, apart from the cuckoos, this warbler is one of the few birds in the world whose voice descends the scale. Apart from the songbirds, the Joan Sutherlands of the Australian bush as it were, many other Australian birds have voices as unusual, varied and bizarre as many in the world.

For some unknown reason, it is claimed that Australia has more mocking birds than any other country. The present tally is about 50 species, but new mockers keep coming up.

As mentioned before, the most talented mimic of all birds is the Superb Lyrebird, a rather plain looking brown bird about the size of a barnyard chook. The Superb Lyrebird usually displays and sings on a little mound of earth that he has cleared just for this purpose. The undersides of his long tail feathers are silvery white and, when he displays and sings, he usually throws his great tail forward over his head so that his

body is completely hidden. He prances around his mound, shimmering his tail feathers and dancing to his own music - a rapid pot-porri of his own loud calls and mimicked songs of other birds that live in his territory.

He must have a marvellous memory and musical ear for some of his imitations are well nigh perfection. If one or two of his imitations are separated from the others on a magnetic tape, even an expert on bird calls, when played the tape, is hard put to tell the stolen sounds from the original.

Although generally not so well known, the femal Superb Lyrebird is also a competent mimic. Because she has to brood the egg in the nest for six weeks and then feed the chick every half hour of daylight for another six weeks, she probably has little time to practice the art of mimicry.

The shining violet-black Satin Bowerbird with those brilliant sapphire eyes, is another Australian mimic of considerable ability. I have heard this bird towards the end of a passage of his song, imitate a Laughing Kooka;burra and an Australian Raven, while at the same time singing his own song - truly a remarkable achievement.

In fact, all the bowerbirds - there are eight species in Australia, are mimics of astonishing ability. I have heard it said, although I will not vouch for its truth, that the Spotted Bowerbird can imitate human voices. But I have heard a Great Bowerbird, in a tree near the men's quarters in Mary Kathleen mining town in central Australia, give a most realistic imitation of a smokers cough.

Mrs H. Curtis of Tamborine Mountains, southern Queensland, once gave a colourful account of the mimetic abilities of a sub-tropical Albert Lyrebird, a close relative of the Superb variety, and a yellow-throated Scrub-wren. "the little scrub-wren cleverly imitated the song of the Grey Shrike-thrush, the Golden Whistler, the explosive whip-crack of the Eastern Whipbird and the 'quick, quick, quick, quick' of the Southern Logrunner, together with several other calls. The lyrebird whistled like a goshawk, shrieked like a flock of terrified lorikeets, crooned like the Brown and Wonga pigeons, screeched like a King Parrot, shouted like a flock of Pied Curawongs,, cried like a Green Catbird, laughed like a Laughing Kookaburra, and then turned himself into a glorified Grey Shrike-thrush, a flock of Crimson Rosellas, and a spirited Southern Logrunner, and at the last a very assertive frog."

So it seems, many Australian birds are songsters with melodies as beautiful as any in the world and mocking birds almost without parallel. But the songsters and mocking birds are not the only Australian birds with outstanding and unusual calls; many others have voices that almost defy description.

For instance, in addition to the Laughing Kookaburra, whose call probably more nearly approaches human laughter than any other bird's call, we have the Green Catbird, which yowls like a midnight tom, and the Southern Stone Curlew whose weird

wailing calls would do justice to any midnight ghost. The Restless Flycatcher with its whirring rapping call; which sounds like scissors being sharpened on a grindstone, is often referred to as the Scissors grinder. The Gang-gang Cockatoo has a voice that sounds like a rusty gate being opened and the White-headed Stilt yaps like an excited terrier. The famous early birdman, John Gould, wrote that the call of the Little Wattlebird reminded him of the sound of retching.

While the Emu's voice suggests a military rat-a-tat beaten on a kettle drum, the tall Brolga's bugling call may well be thought of as the Australain "Call of the Wild". The Cape Barren Goose, the Australain Pelican and the great Australian or Southern Cassowary are examples of several species that grunt like bacon-ready pigs.

Other Australian birds have bell-like voices. The best known of these is the Bell Miner which when calling in a flock, sounds for all the world like a Christmas sleigh. The beautiful Crimson Rosella and the ventriloquial Crested Bellbird also have bell-like voices.

The Grey-crowned Babbler yodels like a Swiss mountaineer, while the male Eastern Whipbird seems to blow himself up like a Lilliputian bomb as he utters his long stockwhip call. His mate or other females answer with a call that sounds like a "choo-choo" or, if there is no answer, the male adds the "choo-choo" himself. The whipcrack call is one of the strongest of all bird voices.

The voice of the Large-tailed Nightjar of northern Australia sounds like wood chopping. The bird varies the number of "chop-chop-chop" sounds from one or two to five or more, and is sometimes called the hammerbird. It is said that the Malayan Chinese used to bet on the number of "chops" the bird would utter in sequence, hence it is also called the Betting Bird.

Apostle Birds, as the name suggests, usually feed on the ground in flocks of a dozen or so. They have many harsh, grating calls and chatter incessantly. In the country they are known as the C.W.A. [Country Women's Association]

There are other birds not yet mentioned. One bird moos like a cow, another coo-ees, yet another buzzes; others in turn whoop, hoot, trill and we even have one that rattles like a half-empty tin matchbox when shaken. If early one morning all these birds were induced to call at the same time and in one place, it would sound like the morning chorus of Hades.

Of the 700-odd species of birds found here since the coming of white man to Australia, only two species of Dwarf Emu have become extinct. However others must be on the verge of extinction, for they have not been sighted for a considerable period and are no longer found in their previous known habitats. I fear that the year may come when we will never hear or see many of the feathered minstrels of the Australian bush mentioned in this modest article

AUSTRALIAN NATURAL HISTORY

The magazine "Australian Natural History" is well worth purchasing. It is published four times a year by the Australian Museum in Sydney, and carries a wide range of articles. One of these by our Club member, Harold Pollock, is reprinted in this issue, and gives an idea of the kind of item printed. The original is better still, being illustrated by beautiful colour photographs.

Perhaps, if you are looking for a special birthday present, a subscription to the magazine would be ideal. Some copies of back issues are available from the club library.

TULLAROOP EXCURSION 12/2/87

Despite the hot weather, four carloads visited Tullaroop Reservoir. Only a few wildflowers were in bloom near the edge of the water. These included Swamp Isotome, Spike Rush and the South African Awned Club-rush. Some of the Yellow Gum in the area have an abundance of juvenile leaves and so present a quite striking appearance. Birds were abundant, and included the following.

SWAN. Scattered around the dam.

PELICAN. A single bird arrived at teatime. We were able to watch it fishing on the opposite shore. It would bend its neck back, and then stab its beak just under the water, catching the prey caught between itself and the shore. The tactics seemed to be successful and after each attempt we were able to watch its catch being swallowed.

HOARY HEADED GREBE. The Grebe were in breeding plumage, so for once, there was no trouble in making a positive identification. Several dozen were swimming nearby. We were unable to see any Little Grebe.

MUSK DUCK. About half a dozen were seen with the tail feathers quite well displayed.

RAVEN. A few were at the edge of the water. The throat hackles were evident, so the birds were identified as Australian Ravens.

WELCOME SWALLOW. Several were flying over the water. One had a favorite perch of a stick at the water's edge.

SHELDUCK. These were very common along the banks. As dusk approached large flocks began to appear from the south and west, and were joined by the Shelduck on the dam, flying off towards the north-east in loose V formations. One count gave an estimate of about a thousand in the sky, and the birds were flying of over half an hour or more. We supposed them to be headed for Cairn Curran, but one of the anglers said that they congregated on one of the pea paddocks.

BLACK-FRONTED DOTTEREL. A few weeks ago one of the group had seen Dotterel with tiny chicks. By the movement of the Dotterels we thought that the chicks were still about in some of the timbered areas.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE. Several were present, swimming near the Hoary-headed Grebe.

RAINBOW BEE-EATER. A large flock was seen along the roadway near the reservoir

DARTER. A darter was seen flying over near dusk, possibly to roost on one of the nearby trees. Its method of flight is quite different to that of a cormorant.

Other birds seen during the afternoon were

Willy Wagtail
Magpie Lark

White-fronted Heron
White-plumed Honeyeater

White Ibis
Restless Flycatcher
Straw-neck Ibis
Large Black Cormorant
Galah

Coot
Red-rump Parrot
Grey Teal
Large Pied Cormorant
White-browed Babbler

E.P.

OBSERVATIONS FOR FEBRUARY

OWLET NIGHTJAR was seen by Rita Mills in Kalimna reserve, north of the High School. Our Bird List gives this to be fairly common, but they are seldom seen, and Rita's sighting makes a new locality record.

LORIKEETS Some Musk Lorikeets have been heard, but the flocks feeding on summer fruit appear to have been absent this year.

FORK-TAILED KITE. A commotion amongst the White Cockatoos in Doveton street on 15th February was caused by a Fork-tailed Kite flying fairly low towards the south. Its fork tail, and typical twitching of its tail, and underwing pattern were all clearly visible. The local Starlings were also agitated, but the Falcon seemed to take little interest in reducing their population. This sighting makes an new locality record.

CAST OF HAWKS. A pair of Swamp Harriers have been seen recently at Moolort. From the dark colour and white tail they were judged to be juveniles. With them (in a radius of about 100 metres) were a pair of Black-shouldered Kites and three or four pair of Brown Falcons.

WHITEFACE AND DIAMOND FIRETAILS. Last year a group of Whiteface, Diamond Firetails and Yellow-tailed Thornbills were seen feeding together at Walmer. Recently the same species were seen near Mt Consultation. This is a new locality record for Whiteface.

MANED DUCK. A large flock (of about 100) Maned Duck was seen in Eagle Road, Harcourt by R. Mills.

WHITE-BROWED WOODSWALLOWS have been observed beside the Bendigo Road in Barkers Creek.

WALLABY IN KAWEKA. Because of the sign "Kaweka Sanctuary" some visitors expect to see animals of various sorts. G. Broadway reported finding of a Wallaby, resting near a pathway, in the sanctuary in late December. Rabbits and Hares are already on the Kaweka list, but this is the first record of a Wallaby. Mr Broadway also said that Wallabies have been previously seen in central Castlemaine. G. Evans reported seeing a Wallaby near Castlemaine Tip (Diamond Gully) in January.

STRAW-NECKED IBIS. A solitary Straw-necked Ibis was seen feeding on the High School oval on the night of the February meeting. It was still there a fortnight afterwards.

KANGAROO WITH HORSES. B. Perry has seen a Kangaroo keeping company with horses at Guildford.

GREY CROWNED BABBLERS have been seen at Castlemaine North. This is an extension of its known area - formerly the Castlemaine Golf Course. The White-browed Babbler is much more common and has been recorded from a variety of localities near Castlemaine. H. Pollock demonstrated that the two can be distinguished by their calls, and played recordings to illustrate this.

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. AGENDA

Excursions leave promptly at the times shown. Date, time and locality of excursions may be changed at the monthly meetings; if not at the meeting check with a committee member.

Monthly meetings at High School. Room 309 at 8.00 p.m.

Fri 13 March. WILDFLOWERS OF THE GOLDFIELDS with G. Leidl.

Sat 14 March. PILCHERS BRIDGE/EPPALOCK. Excursion leaves S.E.C., Mostyn St at 1.30.

Sun 29 March. NEWSTEAD/CLYDESDALE. Bird Observers Club excursion to Clydesdale/Sandon with A. Hartup. Meet Newstead P.O. at 10.00 a.m.

Wed 1 April. GARDENS WALK. A practice walk to prepare for Heritage Week. Meet at Rose Garden car park at 4.00 p.m.

Sat 4 April. MT GAMBIER. Weekend campout of W.V.F.N.C.A. Details from the Secretary.

Wed 8 April. HERITAGE WEEK GARDENS WALK. The C.F.N.C. tour of to see some of the trees in the Botanic Gardens. Meet at Rose Garden car park at 4.00 p.m.

Fri 10 April. THE HIGH COUNTRY. Some scenes of Australian Alps with Ern Perkins.

Sat 11 April. THE CLAY PITS. Excursion to Donkey Gully and the clay pits. Leader is G. Broadway. Meet S.E.C., Mostyn St at 1.30 p.m.

Sun 12 April. HERITAGE WEEK GARDENS WALK. The second of the Gardens's Trees walks. Meet at Rose Garden car park at 4.00 p.m.

Fri 15 May. PERTH TO CENTRAL AUSTRALIA with Pat Bingham. Note that this is the 3rd Friday in May.

Sat 16 May. HAMILTONS CROSSING. Excursion leaves S.E.C., Mostyn St at 1.30 p.m.

Sat 6 June. CAMPOUT. Geelong F.N.C. will hold a campout in the Castlemaine District over the long weekend.

Fri 12 June. KASHMIR - FLOWERS, LAKES and MOUNTAINS with Gretna Weste.

IP1Fri 14 Aug. EUROPE AND AMERICA with Mr G. Barry.

Fri 9 Oct. CHINA with John Zwar.

Sun 18 Oct. MUCKLEFORD FOREST with Bendigo F.N.C. Meet Market Car Park at 10.00 am. Bring your lunch.

Supper-March: J. Buntine and R. Warne
-April: B. Perry and B. Ibbitson